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HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL
INTRODUCTION

1. VLACHS

IN continental Greece north of Corinth the observant traveller is soon aware of communities of Greek-speaking transhumant shepherds known as Sarakatsani (Σαρακατσάνοι, or Σαρακατσάνοι). In the plains it is unnecessary even to leave the main roads to see small groups of circular, domed, huts of wood and thatch, or flocks of sheep and goats guarded by shepherds dressed in rough black suits and immense goat-hair capes woven from the fleeces of their own animals. From May until the first days of November these semi-nomad shepherds graze their considerable flocks on the higher slopes of the mountains, generally 3,000-6,000 feet above sea level; during the remainder of the year they live in the coastal plains. Simple facts of climate and relief, snow on the high ground in winter, in the summer burning heat in the plains, encourage this transhumance in a geographical area physically dominated by the ranges of the Pindus massif and the southern extremity of the Rhodope mountains. Epirus, Thessaly, Macedonia, and Thrace are the provinces in which they are most numerous but communities are found further south in continental Greece and some groups are established in the north of the Peloponnese and Euboea. In the whole of Greece their number, perhaps, approaches eighty thousand,¹ a population which was possibly absolutely greater a hundred years ago, but was certainly relatively more considerable as a fraction of the total inhabitants of the area.

The Greek villagers generally refer to the Sarakatsani simply as Vlachs (βλάχοι), that is shepherds who, in step with the rhythm of the seasons, lead their animals alternately down to the plains and up to the mountains. The occupational reference of the word, Vlach,² is an old one, already in use during the Byzantine period.

¹ Mme Chatzimichalis arrives at a total of 81,473. 'Αγγελική Χατζιμίχαλ [13]
χάλη, Σαρακατσάνοι, Athens, 1957, vol. i, Part A, p. vñ.

² See e.g. Anna Comnena, Ed. Bonn., i, p. 395. One of a number of references quoted by Mme Chatzimichalis, op. cit., vol. i, Part A, p. vñ.

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precipices and tend to 'lean over' towards the west. Thus, in general, the western slopes of the Pindus, as in parts of Zagori, present an extremely difficult terrain over which movement is not easy. Many of the valleys are narrow and steep-sided and the two principal rivers Aóös and Vikos lie in deep and formidable ravines. The canyon of Vikos is a remarkable natural feature 4,000 ft. in depth.

The most important sheep grazing area of the Zagori is the Gamila feature whose highest peak is 8,140 ft. above sea level. On the higher slopes of this mountain the important sheep villages of Papingo, Tsepelevo, Kapesovo, Vradeto, and Skamneli, to mention only the villages on its western flank, graze 33,000 sheep and goats. The rocks of this mountain, as of the other high peaks in Zagori, are of limestone formation; but the smaller features and the valleys are mostly rocks of sandstone.

At the contact lines between the permeable limestone and the sandstone there are often springs and streams fed by the melting snows and the abundant rain, for this is the wettest area of Greece with, in places, an annual rainfall of 50 inches. The limestone slopes produce a sparse but fine grass which the shepherds claim is the best grazing for the milking or pregnant ewe. On some of the lower slopes in the eastern Zagori, especially those which face eastwards, there are considerable forests of silver fir and Corsican pine and a grass which is more luxuriant. The shepherds, however, prefer the thin grasses of the open limestone slopes, and comparative figures of milk yields appear to support this preference.

The more important grazing villages of the Zagori are situated 3,000-4,000 ft. above sea level and the pastures are generally found above the village to an altitude sometimes as high as 6,000 ft. Snow falls on the higher pastures as early as the first days in November and the villages themselves are often deep in snow from Christmas until the middle of March. These are the physical and climatic conditions which lead to the transhumant economy—abundant and, generally, well watered summer grasslands with maximum day temperatures which seldom exceed 80°F. in the village, or 70°F. on the higher pastures, but snow and bitter cold which force the shepherds to take their animals to the plains in winter. In the higher villages of Zagori a few sheep and goats are kept under cover during the

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winter, but there is neither enough hay nor sufficient steading to attempt this on any considerable scale. Similarly, villagers in the plains may keep some sheep through the summer despite a smothering heat and parched grazing. But the condition of these animals is meagre.

Yet it was the Sarakatsani rather than the people of Zagori who exploited, and continue to exploit, these pastoral resources of grass and water; and this is a fact that has to be explained on historical grounds.

The Turks under Sinan Pasha captured Jannina in 1430, and that part of Epirus which now lies between the Albanian frontier and the town of Arta remained an Ottoman possession until its cession to Greece as recently as 1913. From the earliest period of the occupation a majority of these lands were divided into military fiefs. The fief-holders, tenants-in-chief, in exchange for certain military commitments enjoyed the revenue from a number of taxes including the tithe of one-tenth, but the cultivators, mainly Christians, possessed a right of secure tenure in their land which lapsed only if they did not cultivate it over a period of three years. From time to time, however, and by various methods (often through the expropriation of the rights of peasants who had fallen into debt), fiefs were converted into private properties, chiftliks, on which the villagers became métayers, conceding half the produce of their cultivations to the landowner and possessing no certain rights of tenure which the latter did not choose to recognize.

The villages of Zagori, however, succeeded not only in defending their limited rights as Christian villagers in military fiefs but also in persuading the Turks to grant them other and more important privileges. By the eighteenth century the forty-six villages had developed a confederate alliance. Each village elected a representative to a council which in turn appointed a general intendant for Zagori who was established in Jannina as administrator of the confederation's affairs in liaison with the Ottoman authorities. There were three essential privileges which it was the task of this representative to defend; the right of the confederation to collect and deliver to the imperial government taxes owed by the member villages (other than the dues payable to the fief-holders); the right of Zagori villages to administer their own affairs, to hear cases of civil law between

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'having pride', but also things. A shepherd's crook with a carved wooden handle is the privilege of respected heads of family. It has pride. A tselingas of high lineage trains a horse as a μινέκι, an animal that will trot with the foreleg and hindleg moving together. Mounted on such a beast his pride is unassailable by lesser individuals. Other men might, without difficulty, train such an animal; a wage shepherd or a brother without an independent household might easily strut about the village square with a carved shepherd's crook in his hand. But these objects have pride only when a status has been achieved; they merely produce ridicule when it has been usurped.

The migrations between the plains and the mountains (particularly the spring journeys) are important occasions for the display of family pride, for then the entire community is on the road together with their flocks and their horses and mules. This is an opportunity to make a direct physical appraisal of a family, its bearing, and its wealth, in a way that at other times is not possible. 'For pride', on these occasions, horses and mules are decorated with coloured saddle-cloths, the sheep are loaded with large and sonorous bells; and if the spring shearing precedes the journey, one, two, or sometimes three long tufts of fleece (φούντες) are left on their backs. One or two late-born lambs that have been adopted as household pets are gaily decorated with lengths of coloured woollen cord. Despite the hardships of the journey, heat and dust in the spring, often continuous rain in the autumn, the men and women also give much attention to their own appearances. The women wear their best skirts, bodices, and shoes, the men are continually combing their hair and straightening their jackets. If a family has taken a new bride during the previous six months, this woman, decked in the finest clothes of her dowry, leads the first mule in the train so that she may be seen and remarked by all.

Similarly, a wedding is a setting for the display of pride. Men show pride in the dance by the dignity of their demeanour; each struggles to show himself first in skill and enthusiasm (μετακλής). The visible pride of the riders in the bridegroom's procession brings prestige to his family, but also the individual riders vie with one another in the quality of their horses and accoutrements and the severity of their bearing. For pride,

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361 Sarakatsani depart for the mountains. And in the fall, around the 26
221 October, the festival of Saint Demetrius, they leave the mountains
and come down to the plains.

(233) These movements are ascribable to the very method of herding (5)

(113) 5. See M. Sorre: Les fondements de la géographie humaine,
vol. II, part 2, p. 646-647.

that the Sarakatsani carry on and to the needs of their flocks, on
which they are absolutely dependent.

233 In fact, once transplanted to the Greek mountains which are
(133) formed of fissured limestone, the Sarakatsani were able to carry
on but a single economic activity: the herding of sheep and goats.

(137) These two species are the only ones that could derive benefit from
the meager natural pastures which are found on these steep slopes with
their scrub vegetation. (6)

(113) 6. See P. Veyret: Géographie de l'élevage, p. 22 and 26.

132 The surface of the land alone presents numerous inconveniences.
It is known that temperature drops with altitude. A rise of 200 meters
is the equivalent of a distance of 300 kilometers in the direction
of a more northerly latitude. (7)

7. See P. Veyret: *Ibid.*, p. 41.

132 Winter thus comes rapidly in the mountains of the Mediterranean zone,
233 and it is particularly severe there, despite the generally temperate
221 climate prevailing in the Hellenic Peninsula. Vegetation can no
361 longer thrive, humidity reaches a degree harmful to the health of the
sheep, the snow endangers their lives. A change of habitat thus be-
comes necessary. The Sarakatsani then come down into the valleys in
search of more verdant and climatically milder regions.

When spring arrives, a spring which in Greece actually lasts only
a few days, the valleys and grasslands dry up rapidly, the days are
too warm for the livestock to endure the temperature, (8)

(191) 8. It is very characteristic to note that the
sedentary stock-raisers of Greece, the "Karagounides"

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of Thessaly, for example, pasture their flocks in summer during the night and shut them in their pens during the day.

and the Sarakatsani find themselves /20/ obliged to set out again for the mountains, there to find the vegetation ensured by moisture and coolness. (9)

9. M. Sorre: Ibid., p. 635.

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Nonetheless, the livestock reproduce and their numbers increase with time. Now, the large herds need vast spaces--which means they must be driven in search of pasture, and the fact that large pasturages are not numerous in Greece must be taken into account. That is why the movements of the Sarakatsani become nomadic. Never, except by pure coincidence, do groups know in advance where they are going to settle in their next move. It is the availability of pasturage that determines their movements.

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Nothing in this process justifies our saying that the Sarakatsani turned toward nomadism as a "calling." The determinancy which comes into play here is so clear that it is altogether useless to seek another especially not in the domain of group psychology, or to bring in a vague concept such as "ethnic vocation" which can only obscure the problem. It is indeed strange that a certain number of theorists (10)

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10. Among these theorists we must mention P.

Veyret: Ibid, p. 71.

believe in this calling of the nomad who becomes herder only because he is first nomad and others (11) justifiably arise against them.

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11. Jean Brunhes: La Géographie Humaine, vol. I, p.

410, M. Sorre: Ibid., p. 635; Birket Smith: Histoire de la Civilisation, p. 195, etc.

to preach the old truth expressed long ago by Aristotle: (12)

12. Aristotle: Politics.

One is a nomad because one is a herder.

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474 Because they remain in the camp, the women profit more than the men
571 from the intensity of social relations within the Tséligato. In summer,
461 if one is out walking, one can see them all together spinning while
521 gossiping and watching the children, the young girls for their part
mounting the warp or weaving while exchanging confidences and jokes
or singing sublimely lyrical songs.

[887] In a corner, the old men, very dignified, smoke their pipes and
criticize everybody.

[533] The distant sound of bells or shepherd flutes adds to this
atmosphere, which evokes an idyll of Theocritus or a page from Hesiod.

474 But in winter the colors are less soft. When the north winds sting
132 cruelly and snow or storms make the night diabolical, men and women must
233 protect the flocks, above all the newborn lambs, the hope of the future,
by running from one sheepfold to another, from one gorge to another, in
a desperate contest with unleashed nature. It is at such moments that
the Tséligato completely proves its effectiveness as a form of /182/
solidarity and collective action, and in particular as the only framework
open to those who are isolated.

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474 The elements of the Tséligato are arranged hierarchically. At the
596 head one finds the Tséligas and his family. Then the associated families
and the isolated shepherds, on an equal footing. This is true from a
contractual point of view; in actuality the families are hierarchically
arranged according to their size in work force and flocks, the isolated
shepherds occupying a subordinate place.

Of course, the principle of seniority and of division by sex plays
the same role here as in the other social units, the hierarchy of
individuals outside their respective families being rigorously prescribed
at the Tséligato level.

[675] For its part, the process of obligation-compensation seen in the